RPG Reload File 103 – 'Fairune'
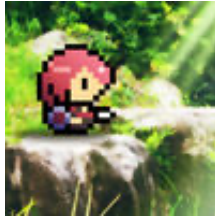
May 28, 2017 by Shaun Musgrave

Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the regular feature where we know the trees are a lie. In each installment, we take a look at an RPG from the App Store's past to see how it stands the test of time. It's a chance to revisit old favorites, reflect on their place in the overall library, or simply to take a deeper dive than our reviews typically allow. Being the disembodied voice that tells you where to go, I try to choose a balanced plate of games to feature. If there's a game you really want to see, though, don't be shy! You can let me know in the comments below, by posting in the Official RPG Reload Club thread, or by tweeting me at @RPGReload. You might not see your suggestion soon, but it will be added to the master list for future consideration.
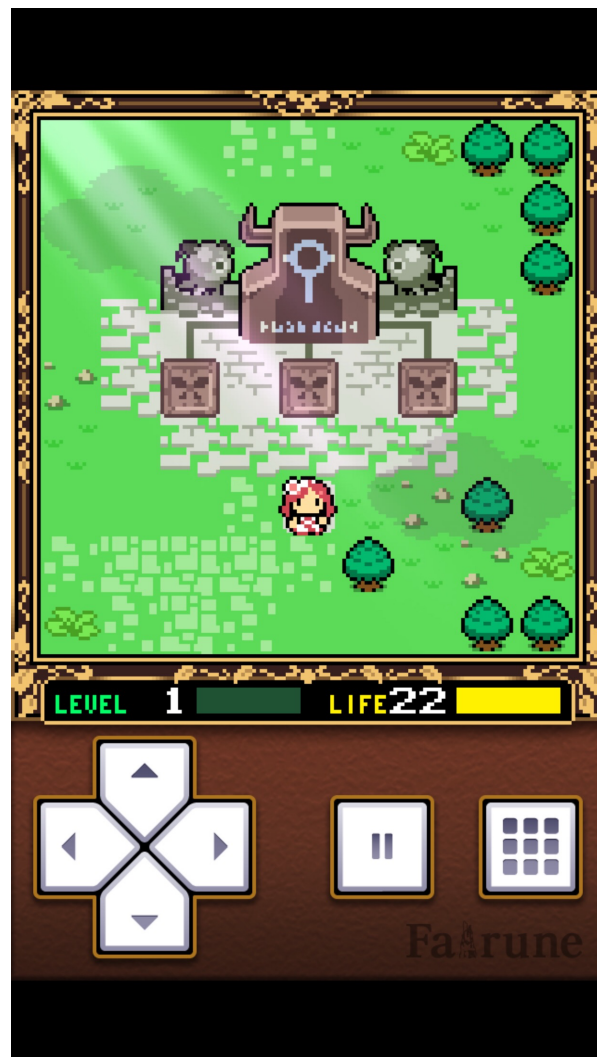
In a lot of ways, we're enjoying an amazing era in the history of video games. Games are global and ubiquitous to a greater extent than ever before, to the point that even a small indie game written by someone in one country may well be enjoyed and played all over the world. This has only recently become normal. In the past, it wasn't uncommon for games from even large publishers to only be released in one region, putting them out of sight for all but the most hardcore of players. An interesting side effect of that particular flow of events is that people are sometimes playing games that pay homage to classics that player has little to no experience with. Today's featured game demonstrates that point quite well. We're taking a look at *Fairune* (Free), a 2013 release from Japanese indie developers Skipmore and Urara-Works.

I suspect the first comparison most Western gamers would make to *Fairune* would be Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda*. That's not a bad comparison in

some ways, but *Fairune* has a different feel from *Zelda*. The truth is, both games have some common ancestors that aren't very well-known outside of Japan. In 1984, Namco was still riding high off of the smash success of *Pac-Man*. It was far from their only hit, but the game had done so well globally that it couldn't help but influence the designs of many other games for some time to come. Even Namco themselves were trying out variations on their popular maze game. One such variation hoped to create a fantasy version of *Pac-Man*, complete with combat, puzzles, and RPG elements. *Tower of Druaga* released in arcades worldwide in June of 1984. It was huge in its home country of Japan, with millions of players trying to figure out its secrets and mysteries. Unfortunately, it failed to catch on elsewhere, but whether you're familiar with it or not, it's worth knowing that *Druaga* is basically the prototype for action-RPGs as we know them. Yes, even *Zelda*.

It didn't take long for games inspired by *Druaga* to show up on home consoles and Japanese PCs. By the end of the year, Falcom had prepared *Dragon Slayer*, a game widely considered to be the first properly-formed action-RPG. Not far behind *Dragon Slayer*, however, was T&E Soft's *Hydlide*. Released on the PC-6001 computer in December of 1984, *Hydlide* is generally known to most Western gamers via its dreadful NES port done by FCI and Pony Canyon. Suffice it to say, when *Hydlide* made its debut in North America in 1989, it wasn't impressing anyone. Over in Japan, it was a different story. *Hydlide* did extremely well. For a short time, T&E Soft was going blow-for-blow with Falcom before the latter pulled away in sales and popularity. *Hydlide* basically took the gameplay from *Tower of Druaga* out of the tower and into an open world. The series ran for five installments, with the last being the absolutely awful 1995 Saturn title *Virtual Hydlide*. It also had a sister series in the form of *Rune Worth*.

Fairune's developers directly credit *Hydlide* and *Rune Worth* as a source of inspiration for their game. Honestly, if you're familiar with all of the games involved, the connections are obvious. *Fairune* is an action-RPG that leans more heavily on the action than the RPG. It's stocked with puzzles both

simple and frustrating. Enemies are defeated by slamming into them with your body, and no hit is landed without taking some damage yourself. Levels are everything. You're either high enough level and can get through, or you're not and will die horribly for your error. Like many games that place that kind of importance on levels, you're going to have to stop and grind at times. Yet, playing *Fairune* is a far more palatable experience in 2017 than any of its sources of inspiration. It's somewhat kinder and certainly gentler. The stakes are lower, and the quest is shorter. Victory is essentially inevitable. You lose nothing when you die save perhaps having to walk back to another spot on the map. Indeed, well-timed deaths can actually help you get through the game quicker.

It's a light bite, in other words. If you don't get stuck anywhere, you'll probably see the ending after only a couple of hours of play. You'll probably die a lot, but even the game asserts that it's not a big deal. Most of the genuine challenge comes from solving the various puzzles in the game. You can usually see what you're looking for, but how to get there is a different matter. Sometimes you'll have to find a secret tunnel. You might need an item to remove an obstacle in your path. Just to give it that annoying vintage feel, you'll also need to keep an eye out for walls that you can pass through. They're always marked, but not as clearly as you might hope they would be. If you don't know that they exist, you might have some real trouble very early on.

The final boss can also be a bit of a bear, depending on where your skills are. Unlike the rest of *Fairune*, which is a pretty straightforward ode to games like *Hydlide* and *Druaga*, the final boss battle is a genuine action sequence. The heroine takes to the sky and needs to best her foe in a three-stage battle that plays out like a shoot-em-up. There's one final trick up the game's sleeve, too. It catches many players off-guard simply because there's nothing else in the game that requires the same kind of thinking. I'll leave that one for you all to have fun with, however. There are some really cute hidden things to find along the way, as well. Search the temples well.

One of the things that makes *Fairune* interesting is in how its battles are resolved. Your character is always strong enough to earn experience from two types of enemies. One will give you a little and only deal a single point of damage back in return. The other will give you more experience, but will also take more of your life points away. Any enemy weaker than the first of those two will be squashed with neither experience gained nor life lost. Any enemy stronger than the second is invulnerable to your attacks and will simply bat you around like a squishy ball. Because of this set-up, it's easy to tell where you ought to be at any given point in time. If the way forward is blocked by enemies that you can't hurt, then you probably shouldn't be there yet. That said, *Fairune*'s world is fairly small and tightly designed. If it weren't for the puzzles, I doubt most people would have any navigation problems at all.

Truthfully, I had thought that replaying *Fairune* wouldn't be as enjoyable since I already knew the solutions to everything. Strangely enough, I think I actually enjoyed the game better this time around. A little mindless, to be sure, but mindless in a good way. That last boss is still a tiger, however. I was also happy to find that the game still runs just fine, even though its last update was a couple of years ago. I'm not sure if that last update included 64-bit support, but if it didn't, I hope Skipmore and Urara-Works do what they have to in order to keep it going. I realize they have switched their focus somewhat to dedicated handhelds, though. And to be fair, *Fairune* is totally free. I think you get a tiny banner ad at the bottom of the screen when you die, and that's really it. So if they do decide to sunset it, well, you're not really out anything.

Fairune - official trailer 1 - iOS/Android

That's my take on *Fairune*. What do you all think? Have you played this one? Did you like it? Would you like to see the sequel make its way over from the Nintendo 3DS? I want answers to these burning questions, and you can provide them by commenting below, posting in the Official RPG Reload Club thread in the forums, or by tweeting me at @RPGReload. As for me, I'll be back next week to introduce the **June RPG Reload Play-Along**. Thanks for reading!

Next Week's Reload: *The June RPG Reload Play-Along*